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MEET THE PRESS: HOW DOES THE PRESS VIEW THE HANDLING OF CANADA/U.S. DISPUTES?

*Courtney Tower**

You will not get an extemporaneous bravura performance like that out of me. I have been in a funk of anxiety all day about what in the world a reporter like me can tell you who are so steeped in the arcane world in which you live. I did not want to say anything pejorative so I looked up “arcane,” and it means “understood by few.” That certainly includes me and that is why I was so worried. I have been stewing away here almost to the point of parroting W. C. Fields’ great line when he wrote his own epitaph for his grave stone saying, “On the whole, I’d rather be in Philadelphia.” Or, there’s President Lincoln’s story of the guy who was being tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail, who said, “If it weren’t for the honor of the thing, I’d rather walk.”

Peter has done you proud as a Canadian reporting from Washington. I report from Ottawa for the *Journal of Commerce*, but I am Canadian. I cannot give you a look at Canada-United States trade relations filtered through an American’s acculturation. You like to have a Canadian in Washington and an American in Canada, and that is really too bad. I think the history, assumptions, beliefs, and belief systems that are built up in a people, this acculturation, drives and explains a lot about the most difficult of the trade disputes that we have.

With due respect for all you experts, that all the managing we have been hearing about today, all the managing so beloved by lawyers and negotiators, forgive me, will not solve these disputes for good and all. They will not be solved until a broader and deeper understanding is achieved by the various publics concerned, and hence, the politicians. That is why, in less eloquent words, I agree with Peter, that Mr. Blanchard bless his soul, is wrong. Because it just has to get out and be sorted out, be talked about, and be understood.

That is nice to say, but achieving broader understanding of mutual self-interest through the media is like the terrain where I come from in Eastern Ontario these days. It is very hard sledding. For one thing, American journalists are very, very thin on the ground in Canada. I am not going to issue that hackneyed complaint that Americans take Canada to be so dull and

* Tower bio.

that, to steal from Dorothy Parker, “[t]here’s no ‘there’ there,” but it is regrettable that there never has been much continuous and contextual reporting of Canada from American reporters located there. Most of the few shining exceptions have pulled out. The *New York Times*, after decades of really superb reporting from staff correspondents based in Canada, has quit. It does not ascribe its withdrawal to Canada being boring. It ascribes it to taxes. The taxes are too high for this fabled newspaper to keep one correspondent in Canada. So your great neighbor and partner, Canada, with so many shared interests that are so intertwined is covered now from Colorado. Canada is an adjunct of the western U.S. The *Times* reporter must be a real dandy, because he soaks up Canadian ways, understands Canadian rhythms, and learns Canadian perspectives and beliefs by surfing the Internet from Denver. It is true. He has said so. Mind you, he does build up formidable frequent flyer points bopping across the border for rifle shot visits on specific stories. The *Washington Post* has an American correspondent in Canada, and that is it. He is the only American correspondent out of any publication or electronic element of any size.

The U.S. media, when it covers Canada at all, picks up from the wire services or comes in for the quick hits, you know, “Quebec threatening to separate” or “Hillary skating on the “Rideau Canal.” There are several Canadian newspapers, four TV networks, CBC radio in French and English who have reporters in the United States, as would be expected. But all told, Canada does a poor job, too, of having reporters in the United States. The consolidations of media ownership of recent years has thinned out to a very few, mostly those who concentrate on trade relations. They are spread so thin, they cover everything under the sun. These consolidations further homogenize the news, reduce competitive reporting, and variety of opinion, as they have done in the United States, but it is a little worse in Canada. Generally in Canada, apart from Toronto, media ownership is concentrated to a degree Americans must find astonishing. The biggest and formerly best papers across the country are owned by one man. He has fifty-six percent of the dailies. These papers had spoken with various voices, but now, some more enthusiastically than others, they present one ideology, one agenda, relentlessly hammering them home on the front pages without subtlety or style, day after day after day.

With that sunny assessment as a backdrop, how does the media view the relationship? Well, as Peter had said when we chatted on the phone, the United States media really does not care. When an issue does surface, when the Canadians are accused of dumping lumber, investing in Cuba, practicing supply management in areas of agriculture, or selling wheat abroad through one marketing board, then Canada is being un-American. Canada is not

playing by the rules. Canada is collectivist, for God's sake, and we cannot have that. The U.S. media takes its quotes from the famous State Department line. I have been reporting the fate of the State Department line for Reuters and *Time* magazine and *Reader's Digest* since the early 1960s.

The Canadians are not any better. They get all heated up about lumber or split-run magazines and they cry "bully." They say the United States is railroading them. They get all this from their canned briefings and by quoting their corporate protagonists. Lest you think that I am dumping all over the press, the briefers, even the government briefers, in both countries they spin like dervishes. Manipulation here lies with governments and business as much as it does with us.

So in the end, what you get is hometown hockey team reporting. It is reporting with nationalism to guide us and very little real homework to inform us. We, each in our own land, look askance at the narrow protectionism of the other side, the bullying Americans, the slippery Canadians. We treat relations as a blood sport, winners and losers. We provide very little context, very little exposition of the pros and cons for audiences to weigh. Balanced coverage by us is quoting the unexplored assertions of one side, the unexplored assertions of the other side, and saying we have done a balanced job without doing our own research. However, we are, if nothing else, steadfast. We are true to our histories. For we in the media, and those who spin us, have learned little and changed little, since the first U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement and Reciprocity Agreement Treaty of 1854.

I wish I could show you one of those pleasant Foreign Affairs Department beautiful offices overlooking the Rideau River in Ottawa where Michael Lier, a senior federal diplomat, works. He appreciates the United States very much. Along his office walls are magnificent cartoons of the middle and late 1800s. Those were the glory years of trenchant and detailed cartooning, cartooning as a provocative art form. Michael says many of the perceptions we have today, in either country, were developed then. They were being developed at that time and they resonate today. It is very interesting to see their staying power.

The first cartoon on the wall is a devilishly funny one that appeared in *Harper's Weekly* in 1879. Canada is so deadly dull that even Sitting Bull can take it no longer. The Indian leader, after defeating General Custer and fleeing to Canada, says from his safe refuge, "I must leave Canada and go back to the liars and the cheats. I like the excitement and tomfoolery of the double-headed Yankee system best. I crave sensation. Life here is too monotonous."

However, Mr. Lier is right. Old perceptions do have an abiding life. *The Economist* magazine, with its trademark ineffable certitude, still says that Canada is ineffably boring. I am glad the *Journal of Commerce* does not agree, because *The Economist* owns the *Journal of Commerce*. A lot of these issues represented by the cartoons on Mr. Lier's walls are timeless. You see them coming back in a different guise, but they are essentially the same. What are they? Well, look at Madame Barshefsky's recent menu of trade complaints about Canada, and then look at Mr. Lier's walls.

Mr. Lier has a full-page cartoon from 1882 portraying protectionist Canada taking, "all we can get from the Yankees in agriculture." The Canadian Agriculture Minister of the time is dismissed as a "green grocer." In that same year, cultural issues arise. When Mark Twain had to register his copyright for a publication in Canada he had to register with the Department of Agriculture. That was the federal department of just about everything in those days in Ottawa.

Harper's Weekly had great fun portraying Canada as a rude culture. In one cartoon, Ottawa is an Indian village. The Agriculture Department is in a teepee. A couple of cabbages bear the death's head emblem and inscription, "We cabbage all we can from the Yankees." In front of the teepee, signs say, "Authors are small potatoes." Think about that issue today. Nothing seems more important to those who have to cover Ambassador Barshefsky, and in Canada, for that matter, than our respectively wayward ways in agriculture and in culture. We were told that nothing may happen in the WTO for a long, long time. But they (agriculture and culture) will be there, both of them, and at more dusty border demonstrations out on the prairie. Then there is always lumber. This one goes back so far it is almost biblical. It made me think of, "as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, lumber battles without end, Amen."

Puck Magazine of New York City in the early 1880s castigates the heavy duty on Canadian lumber. *Puck*, of course, as was the case with most newspapers and magazines of that time, was against that tariff. Another *Puck* cartoon blames over-logging in the United States for flooding even in those days. In, "Lesson of the Floods," *Puck* invokes the spirit Leatherstocking. Leatherstocking says, looking right toward Canada, "cut down yonder fence, but spare my scanty forests." Cutting down Canadian trees to spare American trees was a winner thirty years earlier. American newspapers wanted cheap Canadian paper through reciprocity.

Then there is the fish issue. I will skip that except to mention the Pacific Salmon treaty. I will skip past the cartoon and get to the current affair. Here Canada, and a very well-spun media this time, demonized Alaska as rapacious and presented one interpretation of the equity aspect of that treaty,

when British Columbia's conservation practices are very questionable and when Alaska has a very different and a plausible interpretation of the treaty. But you do not see much of that balance in reporting in Canadian newspapers, with the very good exception of the *Vancouver Sun's* Peter O'Neil who made just some of these points.

Of course, there is always the sovereignty issue, the deep-rooted Canadian fear of being swamped by the U.S. economy, politics, and culture. People just do not get it. It was fear of annexation that led to confederation, for goodness sake, the very start of this country. Versions of those fears are very deep in the national psyche, whatever consultants with their focus groups today are telling the Canadian government. The weekly U.S. magazine *Judge*, ten cents a copy in 1889, warns Americans off their considerable annexation sentiment of that time. Canada, in *Judge*, is a winsome lass, flirting on a bench, bosom generous and inviting, but she has a large sack at her feet marked "Debt." Uncle Sam has that certain gleam in his eye, but he sits carefully over his bag marked, "Surplus." *Judge* asks, "why would we want to take over this debt-ridden lady?"

On the other hand, another two decades later, an apprehended U.S. take-over remained the defining issue in the passionate 1911 election campaign after which Canada rejected the offer of renewed reciprocity made by the United States. One of the things that helped win it was the *Toronto News* running a cartoon showing a large tiger marked "ANNEXATION." She has an offspring smacking its lips called "RECIPROCITY." The two felines glare northward, and they are standing before piles of bones that are labeled "Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Puerto Rico, Philippines." Damn straight, Canada should be added to that pile, said Champ Clark, Speaker Designate in the House of Representatives in February 1911, in his notorious annexation speech. "I am for it," he said, "because I hope to see the day when the American flag will float over every square foot of the British North American possessions clear to the North Pole." Well, that piece of candor resided in Canada for more decades.

When I was a *Time Magazine* correspondent in Ottawa in the late 1960s, one of Speaker Clark's direct lines, Marsh Clark, a fine reporter and a good friend, came to be Bureau Chief in Ottawa. I introduced him to J. W. Pickersgill, a power in successive liberal governments and a historian. Jack Pickersgill, his features benevolent but in his eyes a hard glint, recited verbatim the notorious sentiment and then told Marsh, "No hard feelings."

Overt annexation of Canada, of course, is not going to happen. But one sees a growing uneasiness about the economy becoming, in the trendy phrase you are hearing more and more, hollowed out. Our free trade is said to be hollowing out. The Canadian businesses have head offices, managerial skills,

research, and jobs going south, while the shells of Canadian companies stay behind. A former Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, Willard Estey, a very pro-business legal counsel and a man steeped in knowledge of the economy, says he was a supporter of free trade, but now he is afraid. He has written that the problem is that we are letting corporations with no loyalty to this country strip it of its finite resources. We are witnessing the quiet hijacking of Canadian companies by foreign managers. Other blue-ribbon businessmen, such as the greatly respected Peter Lougheed, former Premier of Alberta, are saying these things as well.

The Business Counsel on National Issues (BCNI), which represents the biggest companies, who poured millions into winning the free trade election campaign of 1988, is beginning to show uneasiness at the pace of the foreign corporate takeover. Of course, BCNI blasts everyone else for it. It is the government's fault. We need more tax breaks. Mr. Estey goes so far as to write that if trends continue, we may see the disintegration of our country as an independent economic entity.

Those who agree with him might like to disinter Rudyard Kipling. The conservatives in 1911 trotted him out to say in the *Montreal Star* that Canada would have to "adopt the commercial, legal, financial, social, and ethical standards which will be imposed on her by the sheer admitted weight of the United States." You heard that again many years later in the 1988 campaign. You hear it now. Believe me, you do.

That is emotionalism, some will say. It is irrational. It is protectionist. Cultural matters are issues of business, nothing else. They are issues of unhindered trade, of using the overwhelming advantages of size and heft, if you have them. I believe that on this one you could never expect those otherwise warm fuzzy folks up north to agree. Consultants are telling Canadian negotiators differently; that Canadians do not care. But they are wrong. I noticed that at a previous Canada/U.S. conference here, Sheila Copps and her idea of telling our own stories was dismissed rather scornfully. But under any Canadian government, this fundamental issue will not go away. The resolve that it should not go away may have been stiffened by resentment over the split-run experience.

As you know, Canada caved when the United States publicly threatened reprisals in the form of tariff sanctions on stated exports such as steel. As you know, reciprocity came in 1854 because newspaper owners campaigned lustily for it. It only had a popularity of about three years. Then a report to your 35th Congress says that pressure grew to abrogate the treaty because of its disastrous effect on the timber and grain-growing regions of the United States. Wouldn't you know it; timber and grain. Here we are all those years later, and the coalition for fair lumber imports, backed by the United States

Trade Representative (USTR), is breathing fire again about Canada's lumbering style.

In no way, they say, will the managed trade deal that exists now be renewed. Canada agrees there will be no deal this time. The rules of free trade will just have to be respected, like it or lump it United States. Well, maybe. We will see. They talk a big game. They spin it furiously. The media will report it all breathlessly, and there will be a deal managing trade and lumber again. Bet on it.

In agriculture, the farmers, the people who matter, the farmers of North and South Dakota are hurting. Whatever the legal rights and wrongs, and we heard some of them today, they are protesting the Canadian trucks that they see go past their farms; trucks of Durham wheat, of cattle and meat that head past their farms to U.S. plants. Whatever the rights and wrongs, they are hurting. It is competition from Canada. Ambassador Barshefsky targets for them, the Canadian Wheat Board citing allegations that have been investigated eight times in the last decade with clean bills of health each time.

That background is rarely given in the Canadian media. Madame Barshefsky targets Canadian dairy, egg, and poultry protectionism, which exists. It is terrible. But the thing is, the Canadian and U.S. media report the criticisms without apparently knowing, or at least saying, that the United States does the same thing in these and other areas. I do not make any case for the weak wheat board or for Canadian or U.S. agricultural policies, nor of one set of supports and subsidies over another. I just wait for a little balance and context in the reporting.

But in these heartfelt areas of natural commodities and of culture, one can only be skeptical. They seem to be too close to the bone in each country to be resolved any time soon. The negotiators use elegant contrivances of wording about which everybody congratulates themselves. The acculturation I mentioned is in play here, and the lobbies work it to a fare-thee-well. We always hear that ninety-five percent or more of our mutual trade is problem-free, or pretty much so. For the hard-nut cases, the negotiators tell the politicians, leave those to us. We will manage them. We will wear down their rough edges over time. One hundred and fifty years is a very long time. The edges are not worn down yet.

Moreover, this is management of trade and is in contravention of the spirit of free trade and market rules. Maybe that is all that can be achieved because of these fundamental and historical ways of thinking. But Ambassador Barshefsky and Ambassador Peter Scher make clear they want no less than the dismantling of the system Canada has always had; government ownership of the forest lands. The Canadian system has to go,

Mr. Scher told me, and I reported that in *The Journal*. Perhaps he will change his tune now that Weyerhaeuser has bought McMillan and Bloedel to become the biggest forest products player on the Canadian West Coast and now that more Canadian firms in Quebec have been falling into American hands as well as the hands of others.

The Coalition for Fair Lumber Imports next time around will also have opposition from two enormous U.S. national associations, of homebuilders and of lumber dealers who had stayed out of the fray before. In agriculture, Canada's protection and tariff rate quotas (TRQs) on dairy, eggs, and poultry, have to go, it is said. No one mentions in their stories the same protections, the same TRQs, for American sugar, American cotton, and peanuts. No one speaks of the marketing boards and the price supports for dairy products in the United States. In agriculture, maybe someday the real participants will realize that they should be working together on both sides of the border rather than yelling across it.

That is beginning to happen. The North American Farm Coalition is now being organized in the two countries to try to raise prices at the farm gate. Kelly Stockman, the director of the National Farmer's Organization for North Dakota, has said that the Organization wants to market commodities together such as feed or cattle, hogs, canola, flax, and other commodities not controlled by the Canadian Wheat Board.

What Mr. Stockman is talking about is forming a common marketing agency covering the two countries and covering several farm commodities. He sounds like some kind of Canadian fifth column. But these are American farmers. More than a year ago, North Dakotan farmers, with state government representatives accompanying them, were in Winnipeg looking at the Wheat Board. They were not there to decry the Board, but to learn how they could set up a marketing agency like it. Indeed, I could not believe it, the one option they wanted to canvass, and they canvassed it seriously, was marketing their U.S. wheat through this terrible Canadian agency. Now, there is collectivism for Mr. Scher to note.

The variety of opinions that we read in the papers in the United States are not necessarily homogenous. It is too bad that kind of thing escapes most media, and thus the politicians. The popular media could further a deeper understanding of the issues, but that would require them to provide the time, the training, and the continuity on the beat for reporters to inform themselves seriously. In today's reality, that seems too much to ask. But perhaps a not-for-profit place could be set up on the Internet for dispassionate, or passionate for that matter, presentation of the facts, the history, and the attitudes surrounding trade issues. Should such basic homework ever appear, the newspapers and television would be quick to download it.